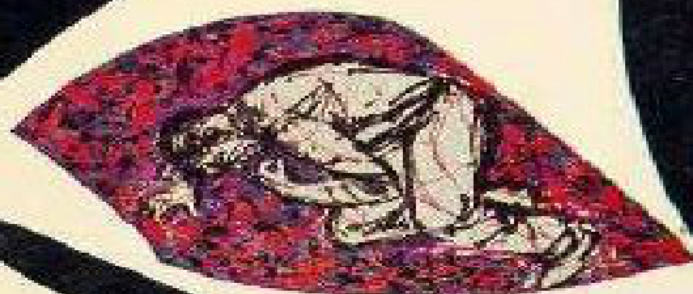


Over the brink of reason lies
the strange world of

**THEODORE
STURGEON**

BEYOND

An Avon Original collection
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for the first time



The Sex Opposite

Theodore Sturgeon

Budgie slid into the laboratory without knocking, as usual.

She was flushed and breathless, her eyes bright with speed and eagerness. "Whatcha got, Muley?"

Muhlenberg kicked the morgue door shut before Budgie could get in line with it. "Nothing," he said flatly, "and of all the people I don't want to see—and at the moment that means all the people there are—you head the list. Go away."

Budgie pulled off her gloves and stuffed them into an oversized shoulder bag, which she hurled across the laboratory onto a work surface. "Come on, Muley. I saw the meat-wagon outside. I know what it brought, too. That double murder in the park. Al told me."

"Al's jaw is one that needs more tying up than any of the stiffes he taxis around," said Muhlenberg bitterly. "Well, you're not getting near this pair."

She came over to him, stood very close. In spite of his annoyance, he couldn't help noticing how soft and full her lips were just then. *Just then*—and the sudden realization added to the annoyance. He had known for a long time that Budgie could turn on mechanisms that made every one of a man's ductless glands purse up its lips and blow like a trumpet. Every time he felt it he hated himself. "Get away from me," he growled. "It won't work."

"What won't, Muley?" she murmured.

Muhlenberg looked her straight in the eye and said something about his preference for raw liver over Budgie-times-twelve.

The softness went out of her lips, to be replaced by no particular hardness. She simply laughed good-naturedly. "All right, you're immune. I'll try logic."

“Nothing will work,” he said. “You will not get in there to see those two, and you’ll get no details from me for any of that *couche-con-carne* stew you call a newspaper story.”

“Okay,” she said surprisingly. She crossed the lab and picked up her handbag. She found a glove and began to pull it on. “Sorry I interrupted you, Muley. I do get the idea. You want to be alone.”

His jaw was too slack to enunciate an answer. He watched her go out, watched the door close, watched it open again, heard her say in a very hurt tone, “But I do think you could tell me *why* you won’t say anything about this murder.”

He scratched his head. “As long as you behave yourself, I guess I do owe you that.” He thought for a moment. “It’s not your kind of a story. That’s about the best way to put it.”

“Not my kind of a story? A double murder in Lover’s Lane? The maudlin mystery of the mugger, or mayhem in Maytime? No kidding, Muley—you’re not serious!”

“Budgie, this one isn’t for fun. It’s ugly. Very *damn* ugly. And it’s serious. It’s mysterious for a number of other reasons than the ones you want to siphon into your readers.”

“What other reasons?”

“Medically. Biologically. Sociologically.”

“My stories got biology. Sociology they got likewise; stodgy truisms about social trends is the way I dish up sex in the public prints, or didn’t you know? So—that leaves medical. What’s so strange medically about this case?”

“Good night, Budgie.”

“Come on, Muley. You can’t horrify *me*.”

“That I know. You’ve trod more primrose pathology in your research than Krafft-Ebing plus eleven comic books. No, Budgie. No more.”

“Dr. F.L. Muhlenberg, brilliant young biologist and special medical consultant to the City and State Police, intimated that these aspects of

the case—the brutal murder and disfigurement of the embarrassed couple—were superficial compared with the unspeakable facts behind them. ‘Medically mysterious,’ he was quoted as saying.” She twinkled at him. “How’s that sound?” She looked at her watch. “And I can make the early editions, too, with a head. Something like DOC SHOCKED SPEECHLESS—and a subhead: Lab Sleuth Suppresses Medical Details of Double Park Killing. Yeah, and your picture.”

“If you dare to print anything of the sort,” he raged, “I’ll—”

“All right, all right,” she said conciliatingly. “I won’t. I really won’t.”

“Promise me?”

“I promise, Muley...if—”

“Why should I bargain?” he demanded suddenly. “Get out of here.”

He began to close the door. “And something for the editorial page,” she said. “Is a doctor within his rights in suppressing information concerning a murderous maniac and his methods?” She closed the door.

Muhlenberg bit his lower lip so hard he all but yelped. He ran to the door and snatched it open. “Wait!”

Budgie was leaning against the doorpost lighting a cigarette. “I *was* waiting,” she said reasonably.

“Come in here,” he grated. He snatched her arm and whirled her inside, slamming the door.

“You’re a brute,” she said rubbing her arm and smiling dazzlingly.

“The only way to muzzle you is to tell the whole story. Right?”

“Right. If I get an exclusive when you’re ready to break the story.”

“There’s probably a kicker in that, too,” he said morosely. He glared at her. Then, “Sit down,” he said.

She did. “I’m all yours.”

“Don’t change the subject,” he said with a ghost of his natural humor. He lit a thoughtful cigarette. “What do you know about this case so

far?"

"Too little," she said. "This couple were having a conversation without words in the park when some muggers jumped them and killed them, a little more gruesomely than usual. But instead of being delivered to the city morgue, they were brought straight to you on the orders of the ambulance intern after one quick look."

"How did you know about it?"

"Well, if you must know, I was in the park. There's a shortcut over by the museum, and I was about a hundred yards down the path when I..."

Muhlenberg waited as long as tact demanded, and a little longer. Her face was still, her gaze detached. "Go on."

"...when I heard a scream," she said in the precise tone of voice which she had been using. Then she began to cry.

"Hey," he said. He knelt beside her, put a hand on her shoulder. She shoved it away angrily, and covered her face with a damp towel. When she took it down again she seemed to be laughing. She was doing it so badly that he turned away in very real embarrassment.

"Sorry," she said in a very shaken whisper. "It...was that kind of a scream. I've never heard anything like it. It did something to me. It had more agony in it than a single sound should be able to have." She closed her eyes.

"Man or woman?"

She shook her head.

"So," he said matter-of-factly, "what did you do then?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all, for I don't know how long." She slammed a small fist down on the table. "I'm supposed to be a reporter!" she flared. "And there I stand like a dummy, like a wharf rat in concussion-shock!" She wet her lips. "When I came around I was standing by a rock wall with one hand on it." She showed him. "Broke two perfectly good fingernails, I was holding on so tight. I ran toward where I'd heard the sound. Just trampled brush, nothing else. I heard a crowd milling around on the avenue. I went up there. The meat-wagon was there, Al and that young sawbones Regal—Ruggles—"

“Regalio.”

“Yeah, him. They’d just put those two bodies into the ambulance. They were covered with blankets. I asked what was up. Regalio waved a finger and said ‘Not for schoolgirls’ and gave me a real death-mask grin. He climbed aboard. I grabbed Al and asked him what was what. He said muggers had killed this couple, and it was pretty rugged. Said Regalio had told him to bring them here, even before he made a police report. They were both about as upset as they could get.”

“I don’t wonder,” said Muhlenberg.

“Then I asked if I could ride and they said no and took off. I grabbed a cab when I found one to grab, which was all of fifteen minutes later, and here I am. Here I am,” she repeated, “getting a story out of you in the damndest way yet. You’re asking, I’m answering.” She got up. “You write the feature, Muley. I’ll go on into your icebox and do your work.”

He caught her arm. “Nah! No you don’t! Like the man said—it’s not for school-girls.”

“Anything you have in there *can’t* be worse than my imagination!” she snapped.

“Sorry. It’s what you get for barging in on me before I’ve had a chance to think something through. You see, this wasn’t exactly two people.”

“I know!” she said sarcastically. “Siamese twins.”

He looked at her distantly. “Yes. ‘Taint funny, kiddo.”

For once she had nothing to say. She put one hand slowly up to her mouth and apparently forgot it, for there it stayed. “That’s what’s so ugly about this. Those two were...torn apart.” He closed his eyes. “I can just see it. I wish I couldn’t. Those thugs drifting through the park at night, out for anything they could get. They hear something...fall right over them...I don’t know. Then—”

“All right, all right,” she whispered hoarsely. “I can hear you.”

“But, damn it,” he said angrily, “I’ve been kicking around this field long enough to know every documented case of such a creature. And I just can’t believe that one like this could exist without having been written up in some medical journal somewhere. Even if they were

born in Soviet Russia, some translation of a report would've appeared somewhere."

"I know Siamese twins are rare. But surely such a birth wouldn't make international headlines!"

"This one would," he said positively. "For one thing, Siamese twins usually bear more anomalies than just the fact that they are attached. They're frequently fraternal rather than identical twins. More often than not one's born more fully developed than the other. Usually when they're born at all they don't live. But these—"

"What's so special?"

Muhlenberg spread his hands. "They're perfect. They're costally joined by a surprisingly small tissue-organ complex—"

"Wait, professor, 'Costally'—you mean at the chest?"

"That's right. And the link is—was—not major. I can't understand why they were never surgically separated. There may be a reason, of course, but that'll have to wait on the autopsy."

"Why wait?"

"It's all I can do to wait." He grinned suddenly. "You see, you're more of a help than you realize, Budge. I'm dying to get to work on them, but under the circumstances I have to wait until morning. Regalio reported to the police, and I know the coroner isn't going to come around this time of night, not if I could show him quintuplets in a chain like sausages. In addition, I don't have identities, I don't have relatives' releases—you know. So—a superficial examination, a lot of wild guesses, and a chance to sound off to you keep myself from going nuts."

"You're *using* me!"

"That's bad?"

"Yes—when I don't get any fun out of it."

He laughed. "I love those incendiary statements of yours. I'm just not flammable."

She looked at him, up and a little sidewise. "Not at all?"

“Not now.”

She considered that. She looked down at her hands, as if they were the problems of Muhlenberg’s susceptibility. She turned the hands over. “Sometimes,” she said, “I really enjoy it when we share something else besides twitches and moans. Maybe we should be more inhibited.”

“Do tell.”

She said, “We have nothing in common. I mean, but *nothing*. We’re different to the core, to the bone. You hunt out facts and so do I, but we could never share that because we don’t use facts for the same thing. You use facts only to find more facts.”

“What do you use them for?”

She smiled. “All sorts of things. A good reporter doesn’t report just what happens. He reports what he *sees*—in many cases a very different thing. Any way...”

“Wonder how these biological pressures affected our friends here,” he mused, thumbing over his shoulder at the morgue.

“About the same, I’d judge, with certain important difficulties. But wait—were they men or women, or one of each?”

“I didn’t tell you, did I?” he said with real startlement.

“No,” she said.

He opened his mouth to answer, but could not. The reason came.

It came from downstairs or outside, or perhaps from nowhere or everywhere, or from a place without a name. It was all around them, inside, behind them in time as well as space. It was the echo of their own first cry when they lost the first warmth and found loneliness, early, as everyone must. It was hurt: some the pain of impact, some of fever and delirium, and some the great pressure of beauty too beautiful to bear. And like pain, it could not be remembered. It lasted as long as it was a sound, and perhaps a little longer, and the frozen time after it died was immeasurable.

Muhlenberg became increasingly conscious of an ache in his calves and in the trapezoid muscles of his back. They sent him a gradual and completely intellectualized message of strain, and very consciously he relieved it and sat down. His movement carried Budgie's arm forward, and he looked down at her hand, which was clamped around his forearm. She moved it away, opening it slowly, and he saw the angry marks of her fingers, and knew they would be bruises in the morning.

She said, "That was the scream. The one I heard. Wasn't once enough?"

It was only then that he could look far enough out of himself to see her face. It was pasty with shock, and wet, and her lips were pale. He leapt to his feet. "Another one! *Come on!*"

He pulled her up and through the door. "Don't you understand?" he blazed. "Another one! It can't be, but somewhere out there it's happened again—"

She pulled back. "Are you sure it wasn't..." She nodded at the closed door of the morgue.

"Don't be ridiculous," he snorted. "*They* couldn't be alive." He hurried her to the stairs.

It was very dark. Muhlenberg's office was in an aging business building which boasted twenty-five-watt bulbs on every other floor. They hurtled through the murk, past the deepest doorways of the law firm, the doll factory, the import-export firm which imported and exported nothing but phone calls, and all the other dim mosaics of enterprise. The building seemed quite deserted, and but for the yellow-orange glow of the landings and the pathetic little bulbs, there were no lights anywhere. And it was as quiet as it was almost dark; quiet as late night; quiet as death.

They burst out onto the old brownstone steps and stopped, afraid to look, wanting to look. There was nothing. Nothing but the street, a lonesome light, a distant horn and, far up at the corner, the distinct clicking of the relays in a traffic-light standard as they changed an ignored string of emeralds to an unnoticed ruby rope.

"Go up to the corner," he said, pointing. "I'll go down the other way.

That noise wasn't far away—"

"No," she said. "I'm coming with you."

"Good," he said, so glad he was amazed at himself. They ran north to the corner. There was no one on the street within two blocks in any direction. There were cars, mostly parked, one coming, but none leaving.

"Now what?" she asked.

For a moment he did not answer. She waited patiently while he listened to the small distant noises which made the night so quiet. Then, "Good night, Budge."

"Good—*what?*"

He waved a hand. "You can go home now."

"But what about the—"

"I'm tired," he said. "I'm bewildered. That scream wrung me like a floor-mop and pulled me down too many stairs too fast. There's too much I don't know about this and not enough I can do about it. So go home."

"Aw, Muley..."

He sighed. "I know. Your story. Budgie, I faithfully promise you I'll give you an exclusive as soon as I have facts I can trust."

She looked carefully at his face in the dim light and nodded at what she saw there. "All right, Muley. The pressure's off. Call me?"

"I'll call you."

He stood watching her walk away. Quite a gal, he thought. He wondered what had moved her to make that odd remark about inhibitions. They'd certainly never bothered her before. But—perhaps she had something there. Sometimes when you take what is loosely called "everything," you have an odd feeling that you haven't gotten much. He shrugged and ambled back toward the laboratory, pondering morphology, teratology, and a case where *monstra per defectum* could coexist with *monstra per fabricam alienam*.

Then he saw the light.

It flickered out over the street, soft and warm. He stopped and looked up. The light showed in a third-story window. It was orange and yellow, but with it was a flaring blue-white. It was pretty. It was also in his laboratory. No—not the laboratory. The morgue.

Muhlenberg groaned. After that he saved his breath. He needed it badly by the time he got back to the laboratory.

Muhlenberg dove for the heavy morgue door and snatched it open. A great pressure of heat punted a gout of smoke into the lab. He slammed the door, ran to a closet, snatched out a full-length lab smock, spun the faucets in the sink and soaked the smock. From another cabinet he snatched up two glass-globe fire extinguishers. He wrapped the wet cloth twice around his face and let the rest drop over his chest and back. Cradling the extinguishers in one bent forearm, he reached for the side of the door and grabbed the pump-type extinguisher racked there.

Now, suddenly not hurrying, he stepped up on the sill and stood on tiptoe, peering through a fold of the wet cloth. Then he crouched low and peered again. Satisfied, he stood up and carefully pegged the two glass extinguishers, one straight ahead, one to the right and down. Then he disappeared into the smoke, holding the third extinguisher at the ready.

There was a rising moan, and the smoke shook like a solid entity and rushed into the room and away. As it cleared, Muhlenberg, head and shoulders wrapped in sooty linen, found himself leaning against the wall, gasping, with one hand on a knife-switch on the wall. A three-foot exhaust fan in the top sash of one window was making quick work of the smoke.

Racks of chemicals, sterilizers, and glass cabinets full of glittering surgeon's tools lined the left wall. Out on the floor were four massive tables, on each of which was a heavy marble top. The rest of the room was taken up by a chemist's bench, sinks, a partitioned-off darkroom with lightproof curtains, and a massive centrifuge.

On one of the tables was a mass of what looked like burned meat and melted animal fat. It smelled bad—not rotten bad, but acrid and—and *wet*, if a smell can be described that way. Through it was the sharp,

stinging odor of corrosive chemicals.

He unwound the ruined smock from his face and threw it into a corner. He walked to the table with the mess on it and stood looking bleakly at it for a time. Suddenly he put out a hand, and with thumb and forefinger pulled out a length of bone.

“What a job,” he breathed at length.

He walked around the table, poked at something slumped there and snatched his hand away. He went to the bench and got a pair of forceps, which he used to pick up the lump. It looked like a piece of lava or slag. He turned on a hooded lamp and studied it closely.

“Thermite, by God,” he breathed.

He stood quite still for a moment, clenching and unclenching his square jaw. He took a long slow turn around the seared horror on the morgue slab, then carefully picked up the forceps and hurled them furiously into a corner. Then he went out to the lab and picked up the phone. He dialed.

“Emergency,” he said. “Hello, Sue. Regalio there? Muhlenberg. Thanks...Hello, Doc. Are you sitting down? All right. Now get this. I’m fresh out of symmetrical teratomorphs. They’re gone...Shut up and I’ll tell you! I was out in the lab talking to a reporter when I heard the damnedest scream. We ran out and found nothing. I left the reporter outside and came back. I couldn’t’ve been out more’n ten-twelve minutes. But somebody got in here, moved both stiffs onto one slab, incised them from the thorax to the pubis, crammed them full of iron oxide and granulated aluminum—I have lots of that sort of stuff around here—fused ‘em with a couple of rolls of magnesium foil and touched ‘em off. Made a great big messy thermite bomb out of them... No, dammit, of *course* there’s nothing left of them! What would you think eight minutes at seven thousand degrees would do?...Oh, dry up, Regalio! I don’t know who did it or why, and I’m too tired to think about it. I’ll see you tomorrow morning. No—what would be the use of sending anyone down here? This wasn’t done to fire the building; whoever did it just wanted to get rid of those bodies, and sure did a job...The coroner? I don’t know what I’ll tell him. I’m going to get a drink and then I’m going to bed. I just wanted you to know. Don’t tell the press. I’ll head off that reporter who was here before. We can do without this kind of story. ‘Mystery arsonist cremated evidence of double killing in lab of medical consultant.’ A block from headquarters, yet...Yeah, and get your driver to keep his trap shut,

too. Okay, Regalio. Just wanted to let you know...Well, you're no sorrier'n I am. We'll just have to wait another couple hundred years while something like that gets born again, I guess."

Muhlenberg hung up, sighed, went into the morgue. He turned off the fan and lights, locked the morgue door, washed up at the laboratory sink, and shut the place up for the night.

It was eleven blocks to his apartment—an awkward distance most of the time, for Muhlenberg was not of the fresh-air and deep-breathing fraternity. Eleven blocks was not far enough to justify a cab and not near enough to make walking a negligible detail. At the seventh block he was aware of an overwhelming thirst and a general sensation that somebody had pulled the plug out of his energy barrel. He was drawn as if by a vacuum into Rudy's, a Mexican bar with Yma Sumac and Villa-Lobos on the jukebox.

"*Ole, amigo*," said Rudy. "Tonight you don' smile."

Muhlenberg crawled wearily onto a stool "*Deme una tequila* sour, and skip the cherry," he said in his bastard Spanish. "I don't know what I got to smile about." He froze, and his eyes bulged. "Come back here, Rudy."

Rudy put down the lemon he was slicing and came close. "I don't want to point, but who *is* that?"

Rudy glanced at the girl. "Ay," he said rapturously. "*Que chuchin*."

Muhlenberg remembered vaguely that *chuchin* was untranslatable, but that the closest English could manage with it was "cute." He shook his head. "That won't do." He held up his hand. "Don't try to find me a Spanish word for it. There isn't any word for it. Who is she?"

Rudy spread his hands. "*No se*."

"She by herself?"

"Si."

Muhlenberg put his chin on his hand. "Make my drink. I want to think."

Rudy went, his mahogany cheeks drawn in and still in his version of a smile.

Muhlenberg looked at the girl in the booth again just as her gaze swept past his face to the bartender. "Rudy!" she called softly, "are you making a tequila sour?"

"*Si, senorita.*"

"Make me one too?"

Rudy beamed. He did not turn his head toward Muhlenberg, but his dark eyes slid over toward him, and Muhlenberg knew that he was intensely amused. Muhlenberg's face grew hot, and he felt like an idiot. He had a wild fantasy that his ears had turned forward and snapped shut, and that the cello-and-velvet sound of her voice, captured, was nestling down inside his head like a warm little animal.

He got off the bar stool, fumbled in his pocket for change and went to the jukebox. She was there before him, slipping a coin in, selecting a strange and wonderful recording called *Vene a Mi Casa*, which was a *borracho* version of "C'mon-a My House."

"I was just going to play that!" he said. He glanced at the jukebox. "Do you like Yma Sumac?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Do you like *lots* of Yma Sumac?" She smiled and, seeing it, he bit his tongue. He dropped in a quarter and punched out six sides of Sumac. When he looked up Rudy was standing by the booth with a little tray on which were two tequila sours. His face was utterly impassive and his head was tilted at the precise angle of inquiry as to where he should put Muhlenberg's drink. Muhlenberg met the girl's eyes, and whether she nodded ever so slightly or whether she did it with a single movement of her eyelids, he did not know, but it meant "yes." He slid into the booth opposite her.

Music came. Only some of it was from the records. He sat and listened to it all. Rudy came with a second drink before he said anything, and only then did he realize how much time had passed while he rested there, taking in her face as if it were quite a new painting by a favorite artist. She did nothing to draw his attention or to reject it. She did not stare rapturously into his eyes or avoid them. She did not even appear to be waiting, or expecting anything of him. She was neither remote nor intimate. She was close, and it was good.

He thought, in your most secret dreams you cut a niche for yourself, and it is finished early, and then you wait for someone to come along to fill it—but to fill it exactly, every cut, curve, hollow and plane of it. And people do come along, and one covers up the niche, and another rattles around inside it, and another is so surrounded by fog that for the longest time you don't know if she fits or not; but each of them hits you with a tremendous impact. And then one comes along and slips in so quietly that you don't know when it happened, and fits so well you almost can't feel anything at all. And that is it.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked him.

He told her, immediately and fully. She nodded as if he had been talking about cats or cathedrals or cam-shafts, or anything else beautiful and complex. She said, "That's right. It isn't all there, of course. It isn't even enough. But everything else isn't enough without it."

"What is 'everything else'?"

"You know," she said.

He thought he did. He wasn't sure. He put it aside for later. "Will you come home with me?"

"Oh, yes."

They got up. She stood by the door, her eyes full of him, while he went to the bar with his wallet.

"Cuanto le debo?"

Rudy's eyes had a depth he had never noticed before. Perhaps it hadn't been there before. "*Nada*," said Rudy.

"On the house? *Muchissitno gracias, amigo*." He knew, profoundly, that he shouldn't protest.

They went to his apartment. While he was pouring brandy—brandy because, if it's good brandy, it marries well with tequila—she asked him if he knew of a place called Shank's, down in the warehouse district. He thought he did; he knew he could find it. "I want to meet you there tomorrow night at eight," she said. "I'll be there," he smiled. He turned to put the brandy carafe back, full of wordless pleasure in the knowledge that all day tomorrow he could look forward to being

with her again.

He played records. He was part sheer technician, part delighted child when he could demonstrate his sound system. He had a copy of the Confucian “Analects” in a sandalwood box. It was printed on rice-paper and hand-illuminated. He had a Finnish dagger with intricate scrollwork which, piece by piece and as a whole, made many pictures. He had a clock made of four glass discs, the inner two each carrying one hand, and each being rim-driven from the base so it seemed to have no works at all.

She loved all these things. She sat in his biggest chair while he stared out at the blue dark hours and she read aloud to him from “The Crock of Gold” and from Thurber and Shakespeare for laughter, and from Shakespeare and William Morris for a good sadness.

She sang, once.

Finally she said, “It’s bedtime. Go and get ready.”

He got up and went into the bedroom and undressed. He showered and rubbed himself pink. Back in the bedroom, he could hear the music she had put on the phonograph. It was the second movement of Prokofiev’s “Classical” Symphony, where the orchestra is asleep and the high strings tiptoe in. It was the third time she had played it. He sat down to wait until the record was over, and when it was, and she didn’t come or speak to him, he went to the living-room door and looked in.

She was gone.

He stood absolutely still and looked around the room. The whole time she had been there she had unostentatiously put everything back after they had looked at it. The amplifier was still on. The phonograph was off, because it shut itself off. The record album of Prokofiev, standing edge-up on the floor by the amplifier, was waiting to receive the record that was still on the turntable.

He stepped into the room and switched off the amplifier. He was suddenly conscious that in doing so he had removed half of what she had left there. He looked down at the record album; then, without touching it, he turned out the lights and went to bed.

You’ll see her tomorrow, he thought.

He thought, you didn't so much as touch her hand. If it weren't for your eyes and ears, you'd have no way of knowing her.

A little later something deep within him turned over and sighed luxuriously. Muhlenberg, it said to him, do you realize that not once during that entire evening did you stop and think: this is an Occasion, this is a Great Day? Not once. The whole thing was easy as breathing.

As he fell asleep he remembered he hadn't even asked her her name.

He awoke profoundly rested, and looked with amazement at his alarm clock. It was only eight, and after what he had been through at the lab last night, plus what he had drunk, plus staying up so late, this feeling was a bonus indeed. He dressed quickly and got down to the lab early. The phone was already ringing. He told the coroner to bring Regalio and to come right down.

It was all very easy to explain in terms of effects; the burned morgue room took care of that. They beat causes around for an hour or so without any conclusion. Since Muhlenberg was so close to the Police Department, though not a member of it, they agreed to kill the story for the time being. If relatives or a carnival owner or somebody came along, that would be different. Meantime, they'd let it ride. It really wasn't so bad.

They went away, and Muhlenberg called the paper.

Budgie had not come to work or called. Perhaps she was out on a story, the switchboard suggested.

The day went fast. He got the morgue cleaned up and a lot done on his research project. He didn't begin to worry until the fourth time he called the paper—that was about five p.m.—and Budgie still hadn't come or called. He got her home phone number and called it. No; she wasn't there. She'd gone out early to work. Try her at the paper.

He went home and bathed and changed, looked up the address of Shank's and took a cab there. He was much too early. It was barely seven-fifteen.

Shank's was a corner bar of the old-fashioned type with plate-glass windows on its corner fronts and flyblown wainscoting behind them. The booths gave a view of the street corner which did the same for the booths. Except for the corner blaze of light, the rest of the place was in darkness, punctuated here and there by the unreal blues and greens

of beer signs in neon script.

Muhlenberg glanced at his watch when he entered, and was appalled. He knew now that he had been artificially busier and busier as the day wore on, and that it was only a weak effort to push aside the thoughts of Budgie and what might have happened to her. His busyness had succeeded in getting him into a spot where he would have nothing to do but sit and wait, and think his worries through.

He chose a booth on the mutual margins of the cave-like darkness and the pallid light, and ordered a beer.

Somebody—let's be conventional and call him Mr. X—had gone 'way out of his way to destroy two bodies in his morgue. A very thorough operator. Of course, if Mr. X was really interested in suppressing information about the two pathetic halves of the murdered monster in the park, he'd only done part of the job. Regalio, Al, Budgie and Muhlenberg knew about it. Regalio and Al had been all right when he had seen them this morning, and certainly no attempts had been made on him. On the other hand, he had been in and around the precinct station and its immediate neighborhood all day, and about the same thing applied to the ambulance staff.

But Budgie...

Not only was she vulnerable, she wasn't even likely to be missed for hours by anyone since she was so frequently out on stories. Stories! Why—as a reporter she presented the greatest menace of all to anyone who wanted to hide information!

With that thought came its corollary: Budgie was missing, and if she had been taken care of he, Muhlenberg, was next on the list. Had to be. He was the only one who had been able to take a good long look at the bodies. He was the one who had given the information to the reporter and the one who still had it to give. In other words, if Budgie had been taken care of, he could expect some sort of attack too, and quickly.

He looked around the place with narrowing eyes. This was a rugged section of town. Why was he here?

He had a lurching sense of shock and pain. The girl he'd met last night

—that couldn't be a part of this thing. It mustn't be. And yet because of her he found himself here, like a sitting duck.

He suddenly understood his unwillingness to think about the significance of Budgie's disappearance.

"Oh, no," he said aloud.

Should he run?

Should he—and perhaps be wrong? He visualized the girl coming there, waiting for him, perhaps getting in some trouble in this dingy place, just because he'd gotten the wind up over his own fantasies.

He couldn't leave. Not until after eight anyway. What else then? If they got him, who would be next? Regalio, certainly. Then Al. Then the coroner himself.

Warn Regalio. That at least he might do, before it was too late. He jumped up.

There was, of course, someone in the phone booth. A woman. He swore and pulled the door open.

"Budgie!"

He reached in almost hysterically, pulled her out. She spun limply into his arms, and for an awful split second his thoughts were indescribable. Then she moved. She squeezed him, looked up incredulously, squeezed him again. "Muley! Oh, Muley, I'm so glad it's you!"

"Budgie, you lunkhead—where've you been?"

"Oh, I've had the most awful—the most wonderful—"

"Hey, yesterday you cried. Isn't that your quota for the year?"

"Oh, shut up. Muley, Muley, no one could get mixed up more than I've been!"

"Oh," he said reflectively, "I dunno. Come on over here. Sit down. Bartender! Two double whiskey sodas!" Inwardly, he smiled at the

difference in a man's attitude toward the world when he has something to protect. "Tell me." He cupped her chin. "First of all, where have you been? You had me scared half to death."

She looked up at him, at each of his eyes in turn. There was a beseeching expression in her whole pose. "You won't laugh at me, Muley?"

"Some of this business is real un-funny."

"Can I *really* talk to you? I never tried." She said, as if there were no change of subject, "You don't know who I am."

"Talk then, so I'll know."

"Well," she began, "it was this morning. When I woke up. It was such a beautiful day! I went down to the corner to get the bus. I said to the man at the newsstand, '*Post?*' and dropped my nickel in his cup, and right in chorus with me was this man..."

"This man," he prompted.

"Yes. Well, he was a young man, about—oh, I don't know how old. Just right, anyway. And the newsdealer didn't know who to give the paper to because he had only one left. We looked at each other, this fellow and I, and laughed out loud. The newsy heard my voice loudest, I guess, or was being chivalrous, and he handed the paper to me. The bus came along then and we got in, and the fellow, the young one, I mean, he was going to take a seat by himself but I said come on—help me read the paper—you helped me buy it." She paused while the one-eyed bartender brought the drinks.

"We never did look at the paper. We sort of...talked. I never met anyone I could talk to like that. Not even you, Muley, even now when I'm trying so. The things that came out...as if I'd known him all my—no," she said, shaking her head violently, "not even like that. I don't know. I can't say. It was fine."

"We crossed the bridge and the bus ran alongside the meadow, out there between the park and the fairgrounds. The grass was too green and the sky was too blue and there was something in me that just wanted to explode. But good, I mean, good. I said I was going to play hookey. I didn't say I'd like to, or I felt like it. I said I was going to. And he said let's, as if I'd asked him, and I didn't question that, not one bit. I don't know where he was going or what he was giving up,

but we pulled the cord and the bus stopped and we got out and headed cross country.”

“What did you do all day?” Muhlenberg asked as she sipped.

“Chased rabbits. Ran. Lay in the sun. Fed ducks. Laughed a lot. Talked. Talked a *whole* lot.” Her eyes came back to the present, back to Muhlenberg. “Gosh, I don’t know, Muley. I tried to tell myself all about it after he left me. I couldn’t. Not so I’d believe it if I listened.”

“And all this wound up in a crummy telephone booth?”

She sobered instantly. “I was supposed to meet him here. I couldn’t just wait around home. I couldn’t stomach the first faint thought of the office. So I just came here.

“I sat down to wait. I don’t know why he asked me to meet him in a place like—what on earth is the matter with you?”

“Nothing,” choked Muhlenberg. “I was having an original thought called, ‘It’s a small world.’” He waved her forthcoming questions away. “Don’t let me interrupt. You first, then me. There’s something weird and wonderful going on here.”

“Where was I? Oh. Well, I sat here waiting and feeling happy, and gradually the feeling went away and the gloom began to seep in. Then I thought about you, and the murder in the park, and that fantastic business at your lab last night, and I began to get scared. I didn’t know what to do. I was going to run from here, and then I had a reaction, and wondered if I was just scaring myself. Suppose he came and I wasn’t here? I couldn’t bear that. Then I got scared again and—wondered if he was part of the whole thing, the Siamese-twin murder and all. And I hated myself for even thinking such a thing. I went into a real hassle. At last I squared myself away and figured the only thing to do was to call you up. And you weren’t at the lab. And the coroner didn’t know where you’d gone and—oh-h-h, *Muley!*”

“It meant that much?”

She nodded.

“Fickle bitch! Minutes after leaving your lover-boy—”

She put her hand over his mouth. “Watch what you say,” she said fiercely. “This was no gay escapade, Muley. It was like—like nothing

I've ever heard of. He didn't touch me, or act as if he wanted to. He didn't have to; it wasn't called for. The whole thing *was* the whole thing, and not a preliminary to anything else. It was—it was—oh, *damn* this language!"

Muhlenberg thought about the Prokofiev album standing upright by his amplifier. Damn it indeed, he thought. "What was his name?" he asked gently.

"His—" She snapped her head up, turned slowly to him. She whispered, "I never asked him..." and her eyes went quite round.

"I thought not." Why did I say that? he asked himself. I almost know...

He said, suddenly, "Budgie, do you love him?"

Her face showed surprise. "I hadn't thought about it. Maybe I don't know what love is. I thought I knew. But it was less than this." She frowned. "It was more than this, though, some ways."

"Tell me something. When he left you, even after a day like that, did you feel...that you'd lost something?"

She thought about it. "Why...no. No, I didn't. I was full up to here, and what he gave me he left with me. That's the big difference. No love's like that. Can you beat that? I didn't *lose* anything!"

He nodded. "Neither did I," he said.

"You *what*?"

But he wasn't listening. He was rising slowly, his eyes on the door. The girl was there. She was dressed differently, she looked trim and balanced. Her face was the same, though, and her incredible eyes. She wore blue jeans, loafers, a heavy, rather loose sweater, and two soft-collar points gleamed against her neck and chin. Her hair hardly longer than his own, but beautiful, beautiful...

He looked down, as he would have looked away from a great light. He saw his watch. It was eight o'clock. And he became aware of Budgie looking fixedly at the figure in the door, her face radiant. "Muley, come on. Come on, Muley. There he is!"

The girl in the doorway saw him then and smiled. She waved and

pointed at the corner booth, the one with windows on two streets. Muhlenberg and Budgie went to her.

She sat down as they came to her. "Hello. Sit there. Both of you." Side by side they sat opposite her. Budgie stared in open admiration. Muhlenberg stared too, and something in the back of his mind began to grow, and grow, and—"No," he said, incredulously. "Yes," she said, directly to him. "It's true." She looked at Budgie. "She doesn't know yet, does she?"

Muhlenberg shook his head. "I hadn't time to tell her."

"Perhaps you shouldn't," said the girl.

Budgie turned excitedly to Muhlenberg. "You know him!"

Muhlenberg said, with difficulty, "I know...know—"

The girl laughed aloud. "You're looking for a pronoun."

Budgie said, "Muley, what's he mean? Let me in on it."

"An autopsy would have shown it, wouldn't it?" he demanded.

The girl nodded. "Very readily. That was a close call."

Budgie looked from one to the other. "Will somebody tell me what in blazes this is all about?"

Muhlenberg met the girl's gaze. She nodded. He put an arm around Budgie. "Listen, girl reporter. Our—our friend here's something... something new and different."

"Not new," said the girl. "We've been around for thousands of years."

"Have you now!" He paused to digest that, while Budgie squirmed and protested, "But—but—but—"

"Shush, you," said Muhlenberg, and squeezed her shoulders gently. "What you spent the afternoon with isn't a man, Budgie, any more than what I spent most of the night with was a woman. Right?"

"Right," the girl said.

"And the Siamese twins weren't Siamese twins, but two of our friend's

kind who—who—”

“They were in syzygy.” An inexpressible sadness was in the smooth, almost contralto, all but tenor voice.

“In what?” asked Budgie.

Muhlenberg spelled it for her. “In some forms of life,” he started to explain, “well, the microscopic animal called paramecium’s a good example—reproduction is accomplished by fission. The creature elongates, and so does its nucleus. Then the nucleus breaks in two, and one half goes to each end of the animal. Then the rest of the animal breaks, and presto—two paramecia.”

“But you—he—”

“Shaddup,” he said. “I’m lecturing. The only trouble with reproduction by fission is that it affords no variation of strains. A single line of paramecium would continue to reproduce that way until, by the law of averages, its dominant traits would all be non-survival ones, and bang—no more paramecia. So they have another process to take care of that difficulty. One paramecium rests beside another, and gradually their contracting side walls begin to fuse. The nuclei gravitate toward that point. The side walls then break down, so that the nuclei then have access to one another. The nuclei flow together, mix and mingle, and after a time they separate and half goes into each animal. Then the side walls close the opening, break away from one another, and each animal goes its way.

“That is syzygy. It is in no sense a sexual process, because paramecia have no sex. It has no direct bearing on reproduction either—that can happen with or without syzygy.” He turned to their companion. “But I’d never heard of syzygy in the higher forms.”

The faintest of smiles. “It’s unique with us, on this planet anyway.”

“What’s the rest of it?” he demanded.

“Our reproduction? We’re parthenogenetic females.”

“Y-you’re a female?” breathed Budgie.

“A term of convenience,” said Muhlenberg. “Each individual has both

kinds of sex organs. They're self-fertilizing."

"That's a—a what do you call it—a hermaphrodite," said Budgie. "Excuse me," she said in a small voice.

Muhlenberg and the girl laughed uproariously; and the magic of that creature was that the laughter couldn't hurt. "It's a very different thing," said Muhlenberg. "Hermaphrodites are human. She—our friend there—isn't."

"You're the humanest thing I ever met in my whole life," said Budgie ardently.

The girl reached across the table and touched Budgie's arm. Muhlenberg suspected that that was the very first physical contact either he or Budgie had yet received from the creature, and that it was a rare thing and a great compliment.

"Thank you," the girl said softly. "Thank you very much for saying that." She nodded to Muhlenberg. "Go on."

"Technically—though I know of no case where it has actually been possible—hermaphrodites can have contact with either sex. But parthenogenetic females won't, can't, and wouldn't. They don't need to. Humans cross strains along with the reproductive process. Parthenogenesis separates the two acts completely." He turned to the girl. "Tell me, how often do you reproduce?"

"As often as we wish to."

"And syzygy?"

"As often as we must. Then—we must."

"And that is—"

"It's difficult. It's like the paramecia's, essentially, but it's infinitely more complex. There's cell meeting and interflow, but in tens and then dozens, hundreds, then thousands of millions of cells. The join begins here—" she put her hand at the approximate location of the human heart—"and extends. But you saw it in those whom I burned. You are one of the few human beings who ever have."

"That isn't what I saw," he reminded her gently.

She nodded, and again there was that deep sadness. "That murder was such a stupid, incredible, unexpected thing!"

"Why were they in the park?" he asked, his voice thick with pity. "Why, out there, in the open, where some such human slugs could find them?"

"They took a chance, because it was important to them," she said wearily. She looked up, and her eyes were luminous. "We love the outdoors. We love the earth, the feel and smell of it, what lives from it and in it. Especially then. It was such a deep thicket, such an isolated pocket. It was the merest accident that those—those men found them there. They couldn't move. They were—well, medically you could call it unconscious. Actually, there—there never was a consciousness like the one which comes with syzygy."

"Can you describe it?"

She shook her head slowly, and it was no violation of her complete frankness. "Do you know, you couldn't describe sexuality to me so that I could understand it? I have no—no comparison, no analogies. It —" she looked from one to the other—"it amazes me. In some ways I envy it. I know it is a strife, which we avoid, for we are very gentle. But you have a capacity for enjoying strife, and all the pain, all the misery and poverty and cruelty which you suffer, is the cornerstone of everything you build. And you build more than anyone or anything in the known universe."

Budgie was wide-eyed. "You envy *us*. *You?*"

She smiled. "Don't you think the things you admire me for are rather commonplace among my own kind? It's just that they're rare in humans."

Muhlenberg said slowly, "Just what is your relationship to humanity?"

"It's symbiotic, of course."

"Symbiotic? You live with us, and us with you, like the cellulose-digesting microbes in a termite? Like the yucca moth, which can eat only nectar from the yucca cactus, which can spread its pollen only through the yucca moth?"

She nodded. "It's purely symbiotic. But it isn't easy to explain. We live on that part of humans which makes them different from animals."

“And in turn—”

“We cultivate it in humans.”

“I don’t understand that,” said Budgie flatly.

“Look into your legends. We’re mentioned often enough there. Who were the sexless angels? Who is the streamlined fat boy on your Valentine’s Day cards? Where does inspiration come from? Who knows three notes of a composer’s new symphony, and whistles the next phrase as he walks by the composer’s house? And—most important to you two—who really understands that part of love between humans which is not sexual—because we can understand no other kind? Read your history, and you’ll see where we’ve been. And in exchange we get the building—bridges, yes, and aircraft and soon, now, space-ships. But other kinds of building too. Songs and poetry and this new thing, this increasing sense of the oneness of all your species. And now it is fumbling toward a United Nations, and later it will grope for the stars; and where it builds, we thrive.”

“Can you name this thing you get from us—this thing that is the difference between men and the rest of the animals?”

“No. But call it a sense of achievement. Where you feel that most, you feed us most. And you feel it most when others of your kind enjoy what you build.”

“Why do you keep yourselves hidden?” Budgie suddenly asked. “Why?” She wrung her hands on the edge of the table. “You’re so beautiful!”

“We have to hide,” the other said gently. “You still kill anything that’s...different.”

Muhlenberg looked at that open, lovely face and felt a sickness, and he could have cried. He said, “Don’t you ever kill anything?” and then hung his head, because it sounded like a defense for the murdering part of humanity. Because it was.

“Yes,” she said very softly, “we do.”

“You can *hate* something?”

“It isn’t hate. Anyone who hates, hates himself as well as the object of his hate. There’s another emotion called righteous anger. That makes

us kill.”

“I can’t conceive of such a thing.”

“What time is it?”

“Almost eight-forty.”

She raised herself from her booth and looked out to the corner. It was dark now, and the usual crowd of youths had gathered under the streetlights.

“I made appointments with three more people this evening,” she said. “They are murderers. Just watch.” Her eyes seemed to blaze.

Under the light, two of the youths were arguing. The crowd, but for a prodding yelp or two, had fallen silent and was beginning to form a ring. Inside the ring, but apart from the two who were arguing, was a third—smaller, heavier and, compared with the sharp-creased, bright-tied arguers, much more poorly dressed, in an Eisenhower jacket with one sleeve tattered up to the elbow.

What happened then happened with frightening speed. One of the arguers smashed the other across the mouth. Spitting blood, the other staggered back, made a lightning move into his coat pocket. The blade looked for all the world like a golden fan as it moved in the cyclic pulsations of the streetlamp. There was a bubbling scream, a deep animal grunt, and two bodies lay tangled and twitching on the sidewalk while blood gouted and seeped and defied the sharpness of creases and the colors of ties.

Far up the block a man shouted and a whistle shrilled. Then the street corner seemed to become a great repulsing pole for humans. People ran outward, rayed outward, until, from above, they must have looked like a great splash in mud, reaching out and out until the growing ring broke and the particles scattered and were gone. And then there were only the bleeding bodies and the third one, the one with the tattered jacket, who hovered and stepped and waited and did not know which way to go. There was the sound of a single pair of running feet, after the others had all run off to silence, and these feet belonged to a man who ran fast and ran closer and breathed heavily through a shrieking police whistle.

The youth in the jacket finally turned and ran away, and the policeman shouted once around his whistle, and then there were two

sharp reports and the youth, running hard, threw up his hands and fell without trying to turn his face away, and skidded on it and lay still with one foot turned in and the other turned out.

The girl in the dark sweater and blue jeans turned away from the windows and sank back into her seat, looking levelly into the drawn faces across the table. "Those were the men who killed those two in the park," she said in a low voice, "and that is how we kill."

"A little like us," said Muhlenberg weakly. He found his handkerchief and wiped off his upper lip. "Three of them for two of you."

"Oh, you don't understand," she said, and there was pity in her voice. "It wasn't because they killed those two. It was because they pulled them apart."

Gradually, the meaning of this crept into Muhlenberg's awed mind, and the awe grew with it. For here was a race which separated insemination from the mixing of strains, and apart from them, in clean-lined definition, was a third component, a psychic interflow. Just a touch of it had given him a magic night and Budgie an enchanted day; hours without strife, without mixed motives or misinterpretations.

If a human, with all his grossly efficient combination of functions, could be led to appreciate one light touch to that degree, what must it mean to have that third component, pure and in essence, torn apart in its fullest flow? This was worse than any crime could be to a human; and yet, where humans can claim clear consciences while jailing a man for a year for stealing a pair of shoes, these people repay the cruelest sacrilege of all with a quick clean blow. It was removal, not punishment. Punishment was alien and inconceivable to them.

He slowly raised his face to the calm, candid eyes of the girl. "Why have you shown us all this?"

"You needed me," she said simply.

"But you came up to destroy those bodies so no one would know—"

"And I found you two, each needing what the other had, and blind to it. No, not blind. I remember you said that if you ever could really share something, you could be very close." She laughed. "Remember

your niche, the one that's finished early and never exactly filled? I told you at the time that it wouldn't be enough by itself if it *were* filled, and anyone completely without it wouldn't have enough either. And you—" She smiled at Budgie. "You never made any secret about what you wanted. And there the two of you were, each taking what you already had, and ignoring what you needed."

"Headline!" said Budgie, "Common Share Takes Stock."

"Subhead!" grinned Muhlenberg, "Man With A Niche Meets Girl With An Itch."

The girl slid out of the booth. "You'll do," she said.

"Wait! You're not going to leave us! Aren't we ever going to see you again?"

"Not knowingly. You won't remember me, or any of this."

"How can you take away—"

"Shush, Muley. You know she can."

"Yes, I guess she—wait though—wait! You give us all this knowledge just so we'll understand—and then you take it all away again. What good will that do us?"

She turned toward them. It may have been because they were still seated and she was standing, but she seemed to tower over them. In a split second of fugue, he had the feeling that he was looking at a great light on a mountain.

"Why, you poor things—didn't you know? Knowledge and understanding aren't props for one another. Knowledge is a pile of bricks, and understanding is a way of building. Build for me!"

They were in a joint called Shank's. After the triple killing, and the wild scramble to get the story phoned in, they started home.

"Muley," she asked suddenly, "what's syzygy?"

"What on earth made you ask me that?"

“It just popped into my head. What is it?”

“A non-sexual interflow between the nuclei of two animals.”

“I never tried that,” she said thoughtfully.

“Well, don’t until we’re married,” he said. They began to hold hands while they walked.

From: Baby is Three—Volume VI: The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon